**20th October 2019**

**Luke 18.1-8**

When I was young my father was seriously ill and was off work for about a year. I remember one day him coming home from visiting the benefits office with my mother. He had been summoned to give an update on his situation and things had got out of hand. Mum was so embarrassed at his behaviour. ‘Why did you have to shout? You drew attention to us all. It was so embarrassing’ she said. ‘But no one was listening’ was my father’s reply. ‘So, I got really angry. That made them listen’. ‘It was embarrassing’ insisted my mother.

I wasn’t there so I don’t know whether the person representing the benefits office was listening or not. Shouty people are usually shouty because they don’t believe any one is listening to them. Sometimes that is true, sometimes its not and more a reflection of their frustration, insecurity, anger whatever.

I guess we all suspect that sometimes to get people’s attention or to get what you want, you need to be angry or aggressive. Those who raise their voices or cause a fuss or threaten trouble often get away with it and get what they want. Can be a risky strategy - for some people and organisations won’t be intimidated and won’t listen until you calm down.

The Gospel story of the persistent widow hints at some of the emotions of human existence. The widow’s despair at the situation she finds herself in is felt through her plea for justice and when eventually granted, we can imagine her joy. The widow’s tale is characterized by her persistent behavior. At the heart of this short parable is a woman acting with determination and tenacity, despite the difficulties she faces. Her persistence is eventually rewarded, and the parable closes by drawing the parallel to us, inviting similar perseverance in our petitions to God.

Perhaps for the widow, persistence feels like a lesson hard learnt. But such determination and tenacity results in a person who can persevere, someone who will keep going despite difficulty. And maybe we all need a little of their perseverance and tenacity in our prayer lives, to keep going, persistently bringing our petitions to God.

When Jesus tells his parable of the widow and the judge, his audience would have smiled knowingly. Rabbinic literature, as well as the Bible, regularly takes poor widows and unjust judges as subjects. In Jesus’ parable, however, both come across as questionable figures. Usually, we might hope to identify with one of the characters, but it’s difficult to identify with a widow who seems motivated only by her selfish revenge. Equally, the judge seems only interested in making a quiet life for himself. Perhaps, then, Jesus is seeking to challenge our stereotypes. In the Bible, widows are typically poor and weak, but this parable’s widow is arguably wealthy enough to do nothing except harass the judge. Equally, the judge does not fear God or respect people. He responds only to the loudest voice. He will give judgement just to protect himself. Jesus’ parable reminds us that God is not like this widow or like this judge. The parable invites us to accept that the world is mixed up and messed up, just like the people in the parable. Yet, we can still find God’s kingdom, God’s justice. It is not of this world, but it still has to be discovered in messy lives.

The parable raises many questions. Should we have the audacity to ask God for things? Some people think prayer is more about changing yourself rather than God. The word pray comes from the middle English ‘to ask earnestly’ and the Latin *precari* which means to entreat. It really is the most natural thing in the world to ask God for a safe landing, or for healing, guidance, forgiveness, provision, protection or even a parking space at the supermarket on a wet October day. Even atheists pray when they are falling out of a place or about to go into battle.

Communion with god can bring stillness, silence, meditation but we are also encouraged to ask to give us this day our daily bread. It is certainly true we can be the answer to our own prayers, but the Bible also insists upon miracles – God breaking in, invading space and time interrupting and disrupting the laws of nature. When sick people came to Jesus, they received more than counselling and a glow of inner peace. Our privilege is to ask audaciously and repeatedly for everything we need, expecting God to answer, naturally and supernaturally, by whatever means he sees fit.

Remember the story of blind Bartimaeus who cried out to Jesus for help. Jesus stopped and asked him ‘what do you want me to do for you?’ wasn’t his need obvious? People often ask why we need to pray. Doesn’t the Lord already know our needs? Can’t he be trusted to do the right thing regardless? But the testimony of scripture is that God asks us, invites us to articulate our needs, calls us into collaboration, asks us to co-operate with his will and purposes. ‘Whether we like it or not’ said the great Baptist Preacher Charles Spurgeon, ‘asking is the rule of the kingdom’. It makes for the relationship and the friendship. It shows our vulnerability and our humility. It expresses our intentionality and faith.

Last weekend we heard at synod about the Wall project just off the M42 round Birmingham which is planned to be a huge public monument to answered prayer. A Christian businessman is trying to raise money and interest to

[The Wall of Answered Prayer](http://www.thewall.org.uk/)

, a national landmark that's being built in Coleshill, Birmingham, built with a million bricks with each brick representing an answer to prayer. People will be able to point their smart phone at each brick and read a testimony of how God has answered someone’s prayer. The hope is that this will remind people of secular Britain of God’s goodness and faithfulness and call people back to relationship with God and the life of prayer. If you want to give your stories of answered prayer, then send in your details - the link was in the Friday church email notices.

Some will skeptically say where is the wall of unanswered prayer? But having answered prayer builds faith. We will come back to unanswered prayer in a moment.

Down the road in Bristol they still remember the ministry of George Mueller a nineteenth century philanthropist and pastor who stared 117 schools, cared for 10,000 orphans and educated 120,0000 children. He was accused of raising the poor above their natural state.

His legacy is made even more remarkable by the fact that instead of appealing of money an making his financial need publicly known he trusted God to provide for his vast operation raising more than £90 million I today’s money. He literally prayed for daily bread.

On one occasion he said grace before 300 orphans gathered for breakfast but there was no food in the kitchen. Suddenly there was a knock at the door and the local baker entered carrying fresh bread that he had been awake all night feeling a n urge to bake for them. The milkman appeared next announcing his cart had broken down outside and wondered whether they could use a load of fresh milk. / George Muller exercised faith on an industrial scale for thousands of vulnerable people and he certainly saw extraordinary answers to prayer, but he also endured hardships. Many of his prayers weren’t dramatically answered. Others weren’t answered at all. He was without doubt a man of faith, but he was also a man of faithfulness who endured discouragement and refused to stop asking.

Have you ever noticed the way children ask their parents for a thing again and again? Pester power they call it. They persist. They nag. In a way they ae learning to intercede Jesus warned us very specifically hat we will sometimes have to ‘keep praying and not give up’. That’s what he says at the start of this parable. Elsewhere he told his disciples to ask, seek, knock and in the original Greek these verbs are written in the present active imperative tense which literally means keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking. Every verb in the lord’s prayer is in imperative mood which can be forceful, assertive, commanding tone of entreaty. The Bible scholar Darrell Johnson concludes ‘to pray the Lord’s Prayer is to command – not to ask – but to command’. Not to pray timidly like a servant before their master but with a quality of confidence tempered with reverence appropriate to us as sons and daughters of a heavenly King.

Is it right to get indignant with God in prayer – like this stroppy widow? The 19th century congregational theologian PT Forsyth argued that contending in prayer was essential. ‘Lose the habit of wrestling and the hope of prevailing with God, make it mere walking with God in friendly talk and precious as that is, yet you tend to lose the reality of prayer at last. In principle you make it more conversation instead of the soul’s great action’.

I don’t think Forsyth was advocating irreverence or unnecessary emotionalism in prayer, but is testifying to that aspect of intercession, which is militant, passionate and defiant. That there is a time and place like Jacob wrestling with the angel, to pray through tears, to groan with the Holy Spirit, to plead with god until your voice give out, to lay hold of the promises and insist on their fulfillment, to go without food, to vent righteous anger at the state of the world and the injustices we see, to dg your heels into a particular situation of suffering or injustice and cry out with clenched fists’ Lord, let your kingdom come’.

Faith is God’s gift to us; faithfulness is our gift to God. God’s ‘suddenly’ happens sometimes slowly. Most instant miracles take years. They owe less to one instant dramatic moment of faith and more to years of faithfulness enduring delays, disappointment and discouragement without giving up or backing down – when we keep ‘beating on heaven’s door with bruised knuckles in the dark’ as George Buttrick describes it.

Of course, some of your prayers will not require perseverance they will be answered straight away. A green light. There are others which are amber lights requiring us to wait and persevere.

The great preacher DL Moody died fifteen years before the invention of traffic lights so he wouldn’t have understood this analogy, but he certainly knew about waiting and persevering in prayer. He carried with him a list of 100 non-Christians for whom he prayed for every day. Over the years whenever one of them gave their life to Christ he would cross their name of the list. By the time of his death 96 of those 100 people had become followers of Jesus. What a testimony to the power of perseverance. Even more remarkable was the four remaining surrendered their lives to Christ at Moody’s funeral. All because of his bloody-minded determination and refusal to relent over the week’s months and years in prayer.

But sometimes the prayers aren’t answered. The traffic light is red. It’s a dead end. The answer is no. You may feel like the angry widow that the judge is not listening. Not answering. Not caring. People lose faith. People give up on God. They haven’t got the answer they were hoping for. How do we deal with disappointment?

You can step into the shadows of gethsemane to acknowledge just how painful it can be sometimes to pray ‘your will be done’. The Bible is way more honest about unanswered prayer that the church. The gospel writers make no attempt to hush up the fact that Jesus himself experienced disappointments in prayer. On one occasion he prayed for a blind man and he was only partially healed, and he had to ray again. On another occasion he couldn’t perform any healings because of opposition and unbelief – which reminds us that we have to contend with the world around us and the forces of evil. Jesus prayed that we would all be one. But clearly and tragically we all remain bitterly divided. In gethsemane before he went to the cross Jesus prayed Father take this cup of suffering away from me. We are told he prayed in great anguish and earnestly (Luke 22.44). Yet God did not let the cup pass from him.

When life hurts like hell and we find ourselves struggling to make sense of unanswered prayer, we may wonder why God doesn’t just click his fingers and make everything better. At such times of unknowing, when there’s nothing good in the pain and we’re helpless and hopeless, it is tempting to doubt God’s kindness and pull away from faith. God may seem like the uncaring Judge. But this is the very time that we need God’s comfort more than ever before. Getting rid of God’s love and power doesn’t actually help. In fact, I would argue it makes things worse. When you try to remove God from the equation of your suffering you reduce yourself to a highly evolved animal in a meaningless universe whose suffering is without purpose, consequence or hope. By holding on to God when things are tough, you retain the possibility of rescue and receive comfort in your distress, a sense of purpose in your pain, and ultimately the hope of life after death. Jesus ends this parable where the unjust judge finally gives justice and says:

*‘will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?****8****I tell you; he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?’*

Will he find faith on earth?

We read the Gethsemane prayer with the benefit of hindsight, understanding exactly why Jesus prayer had to be unanswered. And the bible assures us that one day we will look back on our own lives and understand and come to that place of peace. PT Forsyth again says ‘we shall come one day to a heaven where we shall gratefully know that God’s great refusals were sometimes the truest answers to our truest prayers.

Our thoughts are not your thoughts

Not my will, but your will be done.

May the Son of Man find faith in us.

*Bibliography*

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*Roots Worship Material Sep Oct 2019*